

Jesus' Authority to Forgive and Call Sinners

Mark 2:1-17

Key Verse: 2:10a, "But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins."

Jesus' popularity was continuing to escalate, due to his preaching and especially his healing ministry. Jesus healed an outcast man who had leprosy. Jesus no longer entered a town openly, but people still came to him from everywhere. In the passage we're hearing today, Jesus forgives a man's sins and heals him of paralysis. Then Jesus calls a tax collector, whom people commonly regarded as a "sinner," to be his disciple. The paralytic and the tax collector were nearly polar opposites in that society. Even so, Jesus had mercy and grace upon them both. Jesus came to forgive, heal and call sinners, for he has the authority to do so. May we experience and live in the forgiveness, healing and calling of Jesus Christ.

I. Jesus' authority to forgive and heal a paralyzed man (1-12)

Jesus returned to the town of Capernaum, which the Bible calls his "home." Most likely it was the home of Simon and Andrew. What kind of welcome did Jesus receive? So many gathered at the home that there was no room left, not even outside the door. What did Jesus do? Did he entertain them or feed them? The Bible says, "he preached the word to them." We don't know if they came for healing or to hear Jesus' words. But we know what Jesus did. He preached the word. Here, "the word" refers to the word of God. Jesus told them the truths of God's kingdom, the realities of heaven and earth.

People seem to need many things. But here we see that what people need most is the word of God. Apostle Paul wrote to pastor Timothy, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear." (2 Tim 4:1-3)

What happened while Jesus was preaching? Some men came bringing a paralytic, carried by four of them. But how did they get to Jesus? Surely the standing room only crowd would not just let them through! Probably each person who had come to Jesus thought that their own need or problem was the most urgent, so they wouldn't give an inch to their specific standing spot. Verse 4 tells us, "Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on." Their approach to Jesus was very unusual and even rude, since they not only cut in line and interrupted Jesus' teaching, but they also damaged someone's roof. Perhaps they had to pool their money together afterwards to pay for the repairs. One thing is clear: they were amazing friends or relatives of this paralyzed man.

The crowd must've seen this interruption of Jesus' teaching as a rude intrusion or as a dangerous or even criminal act. To some it might have looked silly or repulsive. How did Jesus do it? The Bible says, "When Jesus saw their faith..." Jesus saw the faith of this man and those helping him. Jesus sees faith. What is faith? Hebrews 11:1 defines it for us: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." Faith is a confident hope and a sure belief in unseen things, namely God and heaven, that is, the kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed the kingdom or reign of God. That was his message. Jesus healed diseases and sicknesses and drove out demons by the power and authority of God. This paralyzed man and his friends had faith in Jesus. And Jesus could see it.

Then Jesus said something very surprising to the paralyzed man. He said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." First, Jesus called him, "Son." Jesus loved him like his own child. Then he spoke perhaps the most amazing words spoken by any man: "your sins are forgiven." Jesus did not specify what sins this man had committed. Jesus simply unilaterally pronounced the forgiveness of sins for this paralyzed man. In high school I knew a Christian girl. I heard rumors that she had an immoral relationship with a high school boy I knew. In a private moment she asked me if I had heard the rumors. I told her, "Yes." She replied, "It's true. But Jesus Christ forgave me." That was the first time I had ever heard anyone say that. My immediate thought as a nominal church-goer was, "Well, if He forgave you then you are surely forgiven, since He's up there with God." My second thought was, "But how do you know that? You speak as if it is a fact—as if you have spoken with him face to face." Her faith baffled me, because I truly wondered how anyone could know that their sins were forgiven. It was a seed of faith planted in me, which would come to bear fruit later.

Here is the truth that all people need to hear and believe: Jesus Christ has the authority to forgive sins. Jesus Christ came to forgive sinners. Some people think, "You Christians talk too much about sin. Isn't sin just a psychological term having to do with a guilty or shameful feeling?" Actually, sin is much more than that. Sin is the most serious barrier between people and God. The prophet Isaiah described this problem: "But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear" (Isa 59:2).

Sin is what destroyed the intimate love relationship between the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and God. And sin continues to destroy this love relationship and to separate people from God. Sin is so serious that God had to set up the temple and the whole sacrificial system in Israel to deal with it, with bloody bulls, goats and sheep, and priests to make offerings. And, the Bible says, these animals actually can't take away sin. Rather, it required the perfect sacrifice of a sinless human to take away our sins. That human is Jesus Christ, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. The temple sacrifices and the priesthood point ultimately to Jesus our Savior and Great High Priest. So Jesus and Jesus alone has the authority and the right to say, "Your sins are forgiven." No wonder he is the way and the truth and the life, and there is no other way to come to God and receive the forgiveness of sins. Apostle Peter declared about Jesus' name, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus could pronounce forgiveness of sins for this man, because Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, who has the authority to take away our sins.

Of course, what Jesus said shocked everyone, especially the religious leaders. Some teachers of the law sat their thinking, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Actually they were right. Only God can forgive sins. Only the One who knows the heart and mind and spirit of God can forgive sins. Only the Messiah, the Son of God has authority on earth to forgive sins.

Jesus knew in his spirit that they were accusing him of blasphemy in their hearts. It is because they had no room in their hearts to consider that Jesus might possibly be the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. So Jesus challenged them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk?'" I'm not exactly sure how to answer Jesus' question. To forgive sins or to enable a paralytic to walk are both humanly impossible. I suppose it's easier to say "your sins are forgiven" because it's an invisible act of God which is humanly impossible to prove or disprove. So to say "get up and walk" would be harder since you can see it with your own eyes. I think that's what Jesus meant. He wanted to show them the evidence of his authority to forgive sins by showing them that by his words he could empower a paralyzed man to walk.

And that's what Jesus did. He said to them, "But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." The paralyzed man got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!" I can only think of two reasons why any observer there would not believe in Jesus at this point: either they would have to think that this whole miracle was staged and the man was not really a paralytic, or, this miracle was done by some power other than God. Jesus will deal with this second reason in a later event. But for the common person, they praised God, recognizing this as an act done by God's power.

Most of us know the story of Joni Eareckson Tada who was paralyzed from the neck down at age 17 and has served the Lord until now at age 71, having written over 40 books. I recently read the book, "Suffer Strong" which was written by Jay Wolf and his partially paralyzed wife Katherine. She had a near death stroke at age 26 which left her body half paralyzed. She was once voted as the best actress in Georgia. Now she is in a wheelchair. She is thankful that God spared her life. Surprisingly, she also finds meaning in not being fully healed of her paralysis. She thinks that if she had been miraculously healed, she would've returned to her normal life and dreams. But her paralysis has caused her to think daily about her purpose and meaning of life on earth. She has found her mission in sharing her story of hope and faith in God, especially with those who feel broken and empty and she can speak from a persuasive place. Before her paralysis, she had depended a lot on her outward appearance for her self-worth. But now through her deeper faith and hope in Christ, she has discovered an inner beauty and an inner healing that she never knew before.

This event has shown us that Jesus can forgive sins and he can empower a paralyzed man to walk. But notice what Jesus did first, emphasizing that it was the more urgent problem of this man, and by extension the most urgent problem we all have. Jesus forgave his sins. And Jesus forgives the sins of those who come to him in faith.

II. Jesus' calls a tax collector to follow him (13-17)

Once again Jesus went out beside the lake. A large crowd came to him, and he began to teach them. Jesus loved to teach the truth of God's word to those who came to him. We've talked about this already.

As Jesus walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. These words "follow me" were the same words that Jesus used to call Simon and Andrew to follow him. Jesus had thus far called four fishermen to be his disciples or full-time students. They were two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. This is the fifth disciple that Jesus called to follow him. But he was of quite a different background and upbringing than the four fishermen disciples. While fishermen had to be physically strong, a tax collector had to be mentally keen in accounting and recording, and a good communicator to both taxpayers and to Roman officials. Herein lies the controversy: he was collecting taxes for the Romans. So his own Jewish people hated him with a passion, for he betrayed his own people to make a personal fortune. Probably his own parents disowned him. One thing we know for sure: he was branded as a "sinner," along with prostitutes, who also made money by immoral means.

This man, Levi, also known as Matthew, was called by Jesus. I don't know about you, but if I were looking for men who would contribute to changing world history, I don't think I would recruit such a person. He didn't look very likely to inspire people to follow God. Unless of course, those people were in hot pursuit of money. Why? Because Levi knew what it was like to have lots of money but to give it up to follow Jesus. In fact, there is rich young man later in this gospel who decides not to give away his possessions and follow Jesus. And we know that Levi did not stop following Jesus after a 1-year money-back guarantee. Levi (or Matthew) stuck it out with Jesus and even wrote the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew testifies that following Jesus is far better than living for money and worth more than anything money can buy. Matthew testifies that no one can serve both God and money. Yet Matthew also testifies that when we seek God's kingdom and righteousness first, God will provide all that we need. Thanks to St. Matthew we have gained so much divine insight into the blessedness of those who follow Jesus Christ.

Levi's response was immediate. He got up and followed Jesus. He closed his booth and actually quit his job. Wow! That's faith and that's trust in God and in his Son, Jesus Christ. Still, Levi had a house and plenty of food in the kitchen. And that's where they went next. Jesus and his disciples went to have dinner at Levi's house. Luke tells us it was a great banquet for Jesus, and Levi invited many of his tax collector friends. After all, he probably only had tax collector friends, since no one else would want to be his friend, except people of questionable character like himself. Well, almost no one else wanted to be his friend, except Jesus, of course.

So we have a very interesting banquet dynamic going on here, with Jesus and his disciples, and all these tax collectors and other "sinners." That might make for an awkward Bible study group. Somehow from somewhere the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw Jesus eating with the sinners and tax collectors. I highly doubt they were invited to this banquet, especially since the Pharisees only had harsh criticism of the tax collector lifestyle, and they were trained to avoid "sinners." After all, Psalm 1 begins by saying, "Blessed is the one who does not walk in

step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers...” This Bible verse alone would challenge those who want to hang out with people of sinful reputation.

So whether it was through the window or at door or somehow a few Pharisees got in to the party, they asked Jesus’ disciples, “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” Their condescending question implied that Jesus was guilty by association. The Jews were trained in keeping themselves pure and untainted from other cultures and other religions. In fact, God had warned them not to mix with other peoples or they would be led astray to worship other gods. This happened many times in their history. So why was Jesus breaking their training and tradition? Good question.

Perhaps the disciples were too embarrassed to answer or they didn’t know what to say in response. Fortunately for them, Jesus answered for himself. On hearing their question, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Jesus saw his mission similar to a doctor who has a mission to heal the sick. Doctors must see a lot of sick people. It is their mission to heal them. The doctor doesn’t look at a patient and say, “Eww! Get away from me!” Rather, a doctor loves their patient and fights their disease or sickness. Their goal is to heal the sick patient.

Jesus saw that the world is filled with sick people who need healing and restoration. This sickness, called sin, has spread to all people. This sickness of sin ends in death. This sickness of sin brings condemnation and the righteous judgment of God. Jesus is the Sin-Doctor. Jesus came to save us from spiritual death and eternal condemnation due to our sins. Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners. This is what the Pharisees needed to understand and accept. The problem was they didn’t regard themselves as sick or in need of healing. Their self-righteousness blinded them to their own sickness and to the remedy and cure standing right in front of them.

Years ago I held a lunch time Bible study at my work place. One day I invited someone at work if he’d like to attend. He replied, “Bible study? That’s not for me, man. I’m a sinner!” I felt awkward and didn’t know how to reply. But a few moments after he left I thought, “Actually, Bible study is for you, because Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners!” Actually it was this Bible verse that I remembered.

Can you relate to the paralytic in this passage? How about the tax collector? As for me, as I mentioned earlier, I attended church regularly before really studying the Bible. As a result, I felt pretty good about myself, for the most part, due to my church attendance. But I also knew that I had plenty of sins of lust, pride, vanity and indifference to name just a few. Somewhat like Levi, I was able-minded and in fast pursuit of money. What drives most people today? Is it the pursuit of money or pleasure or possessions or power or prestige? In his book “The Outliers,” author Malcolm Gladwell gives two examples of people who invested 10,000 hours in their craft to make a great success: the Beatles and Bill Gates. Almost everyone knows The Beatles and Bill Gates. But would you trade places with them? I wouldn’t. I’m thankful for the life I’ve found in Jesus Christ. This week I turned 56. I think I’ve invested at least 5 hours a week for the last 36

years of my life in Bible study. So in 2.5 more years I'll reach 10,000 hours in Bible study. Do I regret it? Not at all. Has it been worth it? Absolutely. In fact, I remember at my college graduation I was most thankful for the time spent in God's word, growing in my love relationship with Jesus Christ. I'm praying my children may all discover the same joy and blessing in Jesus.

Today we heard Jesus' words to a paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven," and to a sinful tax collector, "Follow me." Only Jesus has the authority to forgive our sins. Jesus calls us to leave a life of sin and to follow him full time as believers in Jesus. Thanks and praise be to Jesus Christ who came to call sinners, like you and like me. This is good news for all who believe.